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Folk-Speech in Indiana

BY PAUL L. HAWORTH AND O. G. S.

[The following, published in *The Indianapolis News* for August 15, 1900, is by far the best study we have seen of this interesting subject, and as such we here give it space]

IN the cities of our State, the schoolmaster, the newspaper and the railroad have long since wrought such changes from the Indiana of Edward Eggleston, that the English heard in Indianapolis or Fort Wayne differs but little from the English of New York or Philadelphia. But this can not be said of our rural districts, for there the forces that tend to produce uniformity of speech operate much more slowly.

Yet even in the country there has really been much change in the language spoken; and, in view of the rapid extension of electric lines, the growth of better schools, and the increased reading of books and newspapers, it is probable that the change will be much more rapid in the future. If the old Hoosier dialect is ever to be studied and the results recorded, the work must be done soon; even now it is almost too late.

The Hoosier dialect has never been uniform the State over. There have always been local variations, not only in peculiar expressions, but in accent. Occasionally there are slight differences even between adjoining counties.

Particularly marked is the dissimilarity between the folk-speech of the northern part of the State and that of the southern part. The settlers in the north came mainly from New England, Pennsylvania, New York and northern Ohio, and, in consequence, there exists in the north a strong Yankee twang. Those in the southern part came mainly from Virginia, Maryland, southern Ohio, the Carolinas, Kentucky and Tennessee; and the dialect shows the Southern influence, containing some points of similarity to the negro and the "poor white" or "cracker" dialect. The

expression "right smart," as in the sentence: "He has a right smart chance of corn," is an illustration of the dissimilarity. The expression is used generally in central and southern Indiana, but is rarely met with farther north. It is worth noticing in this connection that while "right," in the sense of "very," is so much used in the South as to be considered by some writers as a Southern provincialism, it is as well descended as most English words. The Psalms have, "I myself will wake right early."

Not only has folk-speech never been uniform throughout Indiana, but exact geographical bounds can not be given to the Hoosier dialect. It does not end with State lines, but extends beyond them into Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan and Illinois, gradually becoming modified and shading off into other dialects. Much the same may be said in regard to the other dialects extending into Indiana. Doubtless, also, in many States farther west there are colonies of transplanted Hoosiers where the dialect is spoken in almost its original purity; while all over the United States expressions of Hoosier birth have become domiciled.

The fact is, it has always been true, and never more so than in these days of rapid communication and shifting population, that in nothing is the student of folk-speech so liable to error as in assigning geographical limits to a word or phrase. Our local dialects, as well as the local English dialects from which we get many of our folk-words and phrases, are pretty thoroughly mixed.

For example, take the familiar word, "tote," a word which we know did not originate in Indiana, yet which has become a part of Hoosier dialect nevertheless. Most persons, if questioned as to the origin and range of this word, would doubtless connect it with the negro, and certain it is that the negro—especially the negro in dialect stories—uses the word freely. As a matter of fact, however, the word was in use in Virginia at least as early as 1677, when there were four times more white bond-servants than there were negroes; there are old, abandoned postage roads in Maine, where negroes were unknown, that went by the name of "tote roads"; and, furthermore, the word "tote" was a common one in England during the seventeenth century. The conclusion must therefore be that "tote" is not of African origin, nor is its use confined to localities where negroes are found.

"Cantankerous" is another word often met with in Hoosier

dialect, but by no means confined to the narrow bounds of our State. Thackeray speaks of a "cantankerous humor." Charles Egbert Craddock (Miss Murfree), in her story, "The Casting Vote," puts into the mouth of the coroner the sentence: "He's ez hard-headed, an' tyrannical, an' perverse, an' cantankerous a critter ez ever lived." Even Chaucer makes use of the word "conteke," from which "cantankerous" is probably derived.

So wide, indeed, is the geographical distribution of most folk-words and phrases that, while taking the United States over, one can collect great numbers of colloquialisms, it is extremely difficult to find words or phrases that are confined to a single dialect. The fact is, the mixing process has been so effective that most provincialisms have ceased to be provincial. The writers of this article are compelled to confess, and they take no shame to themselves for so doing, that, in spite of considerable search, they have been unable to find a single provincialism which they would be willing to assert is at present confined to Indiana alone.

"Wants out" and "wants in," in such sentences as "the dog wants out," that is, "wants to go out," have been pointed out as peculiar to our State. Possibly so, but the elision occurs in other phrases, e. g., "they let me in for a nickel," "the hired man wants off," and is so simple and useful that its use is probably wide-spread.

A native of Massachusetts once asked one of the writers about the word "ornary," saying he had never heard it out of Hoosier-dom. The word is a simple and natural variation of "ordinary" through the shortened pronunciation of "ord'inary," and its present meaning has become, through successive steps, common, mean, low-down. Its use is by no means confined to Indiana.

The word "mosey," frequently heard in such expressions as "He moseyed off down the crick," has the Hoosier stamp, but it is met with elsewhere. The dictionaries which define it are curiously in error as regards its meaning. According to them it means to move off quickly, to get out, to light out, to hustle. But in central Indiana, at least, it means to saunter along, to walk slowly along, as if with no particular destination in view, and is rarely or never used in the sense given by the dictionaries. Most accounts of its derivation are equally erroneous. One

author tells a story of a defaulting postmaster, named Moses, who left between two days, and he absurdly connects the word with the name and manner of flight. The word possibly comes from the Spanish imperative verb, "vamos," go; i. e., it is a variation of "vamoose," which is so derived, and which has some of the meanings ascribed to "mosey."

Probably some, if not all, of the following words and phrases are more frequently used in Indiana than elsewhere: "Heap-sight," as in "more ground by a heap-sight"; "juberous," as in "I felt mighty juberous about crossin' the river"; "jamboree," in the sense of a "big time"; "flabbergasted," i. e., exhausted; "gargly," i. e., awkward; "I mind that," for "I remember that"; "bumfoozled," i. e., "rattled"; "whang-doodle," as in "Are you going to the whang-doodle tonight?"

But the individuality of a dialect is, in fact, far more a result of accent or of pronunciation than of the possession of expressions peculiar to itself. As has just been pointed out, Indiana has but few provincialisms that are peculiarly her own. But where else than in Indiana would one hear the long-drawn flatness of the "a" in such words as "sassers," "saft," "pasnips," etc.? Or where else would one hear such a sentence as "I swum straight across the crick, an' kep' a-goin' right ahead through the paster, an' clim plum to the top of yan ridge over yander, an' wuz considerable tired-like comin' down t'other side, but at last got to that air road," pronounced as a citizen of "Hoopole kyounty, Injeanny," would have pronounced it forty years ago.

Perhaps the most marked characteristic of incorrect as compared with correct speech consists in the abbreviation or contortion of words. In Indiana it is common to hear "fur" used for far, "furder" for further, "kin" for can, "quare" for queer, "perty" for pretty, "drap" for drop, "seed" for saw, "kinder" for kind of, "sheer" for share, "tuck" for took, "sumpin" for something, "ole" for old, "biler" for boiler, "shan't" for shall not, "ain't" for am not, etc., "kittle" for kettle, "h'isted" for hoisted, "j'int" for joint, "ruinated" for ruined, etc.

It is worth noticing, however, that some abbreviations once looked on as in bad form are rapidly gaining in favor. "Isn't," "doesn't," "didn't," "I'll", "he'll," "don't," "won't" and some other such words are now generally regarded as permissible in

conversation and informal writing. "Ain't," "shan't," etc., are still considered bad.

Notwithstanding the admonitions of the grammar-makers, our people in large majority insist on using "lay" instead of lie. More than this, the word can be found so used by good writers. As a very recent example, let me quote from Bret Harte's "A Jack and Jill of the Sierras" (McClure's for July, 1900): "Then every man laid down again, as if trying to erase himself." Chaucer uses it in the prologue. Robert Louis Stevenson more than once uses "eat" (pronunciation et) instead of ate. Addison says "I lit my pipe with paper." "It's me," or "it is me," is coming to be universally used instead of "it is I," and the usage is sanctioned by such an authority as Barrett Wendell, of Harvard. The truth is, easy and convenient expressions, despite grammatical rules and the ravings of purists, are like Banquo's ghost; they will not down.

Most persons have heard their illiterate neighbors use such seeming contortions as "because" (because), "j'ine" (join), "bile" (boil), "seed" (saw), "deaf" (like leaf), "jist" or "jest" (just), "shet" (shut), "chaw" (chew) and "techy" (touchy). At first blush these seem hopelessly bad, yet in reality they are but the older forms of the equivalent words now in use. Pepys quotes a letter written by the Earl of Leicester, Elizabeth's favorite, concerning the sudden death of Amy Robsart, in which the form "because" occurs. Johnson says in his dictionary: "Bile; this is generally spelt boil, but, I think, less properly." Pope and Dryden rhyme "join" with "line," or some such word:

"Tis not enough taste, judgment, learning join;
In all you speak let truth and candour shine."

In fact, "jine" was at one time considered the best pronunciation. Shakespeare uses "tetchy" three times. "Kiver," "deaf" and "chaw" are good old English words. Concerning the last, Schele de Vere quotes the following from a private letter:

"The late eloquent Watkins Leigh was asked by a friend what he thought of James Buchanan (the President), and answered that he had one serious objection to him, and when pressed to name it, said that once, when he and Mr. Buchanan were sitting together in the United States Senate, the latter

asked him for a chew of tobacco instead of a chaw." Evidently Mr. Buchanan "put on a little too much dog" to suit his confrere. The use of chewing-gum threatens to make chew the universal term, though the old form still prevails among those who now and then take a "chaw of tobacco."

Numerous other expressions have a better justification than most people would guess. The Bible gives us "with the skin of my teeth," Job, XVIII, 20; "clean gone," Psalms, 77, 8; a "howling wilderness," Deuteronomy 32, 10. "Gumption" and "hustle" are both of ancient use. Shakespeare speaks of a "deck of cards," and uses "fire" in the sense of to thrust out. Gower uses "to let slide"; Ben Jonson, "to swop," and "bulldoze" occurs in Scott. The "them" in such expressions as "them books" is a survival from the old dative plural, "thaem bocum." Fielding uses "limb" for "leg."

A frequent source of error is the use of a good word in a wrong sense. Judged by the standard of the Queen's English, "mad," "scholar" and "fix" are words often misused in Indiana. Very often we hear a person utter such an expression as "I was mad at him." If the speaker means to say that he was so enraged as to be well-nigh insane, "mad" is the word to use; but if the feeling was of a milder sort, he should say, "I was angry at him." It should be observed, however, that "mad" in the sense of angry occurs in the Bible and elsewhere. "Scholar" is by many people used interchangeably with student or pupil, but, strictly speaking, while all scholars are students and some are pupils, the vast majority of students and pupils are not scholars. Scholar is more properly used to designate a person of high intellectual attainments. "The teacher sent all the scholars home" is incorrect. "To fix," which means to fasten or make permanent, is often misused in the sense of to mend or repair, as in the sentence, "I have just fixed the fence"—i. e., "I have just repaired the fence." "Smart," in the sense of intellectual, e. g., "He's a real smart boy"; "clever," in the sense of good-natured or kindly, e. g., "He's been mighty clever to me," and "mean," in the sense of bad or wicked, e. g., "He's awfully mean to her," are also colloquialisms frequently heard in Indiana.

Persons who have lived in the rural districts of the State will

recognize the following very common expressions: "All-git-out," as in "It's a-rainin' to beat all-git-out"; "passel," as in "They're jist a passel of fools"; "hump your stumps," as in "Hump your stumps, old woman, and git me up a snack"; "galluses," for suspenders; "fixins," as in "pie, an' cake, an' chicken, an' sich fixin's" (said to be common in Pennsylvania); "mitten," to give the "sack" or the "hooks"; "sculdugery," i.e., trickery; "piece of calico," i.e., a woman; "finicky," i.e., finical; "slather," as in "He just slathers away and says anything"; "shenanigan," to cheat; "thing-a-majig," as in "What kind of a thing-a-majig have you got there?"

"Socdolager," an expression frequently heard in some localities, is said to be connected in its derivation with doxology. The doxology comes near the end of a "meeting," and when a man or a boy gives another a "socdolager" (the similarity in sound must be apparent), the end of the fight is at hand.

A student of Indiana folk-speech meets with many striking and forcible expressions. "He's rich, he has heaps of money," is used by persons in some rural districts to convey the idea of wealth. Others substitute "sights" or "gobs" for "heaps." Yet others use a ranker word still: "He's rich, he jist has gaums of money," as though the gold were smeared over the person of the fortunate possessor.

"Between you and me and the gatepost" is a formula used in impressing the necessity of secrecy. "When he gits a dollar it's got home," is an admirable description of a stingy man. "I'll sure git there or bust a biler" is a forcible expression, to say the least. An old woman from the hills of Brown county once expressively described to one of the writers the feelings experienced after a night spent in dancing by saying: "When I'uz goin' home in the mornin', both sides of the road 'u'd belong to me."

An examination of some of the folk-words and phrases that have been current in Indiana will reveal many things of historical interest. Think, for example, of the testimony on former economic conditions contained in the expression "sharp bit." In the early days there was but little or no small change in the country, nor was it convenient for traders coming from New Orleans and elsewhere to bring with them any other than the

larger coins. In order to make smaller change, the settlers cut these coins into pieces, and these pieces were known as "sharp bits." The demand for words and expressions to relieve overwrought feeling seems to be felt by all humanity—Hoosier humanity as well as otherwise.

The blood of the Hoosier is less easily heated than that of his neighbor across the Ohio. Yet, if one is to judge from the number of swear words and exclamations in use in our State, it would seem that even we occasionally feel their need. Of the following list of exclamatory expressions, all are considered in good form on certain occasions, at least, in some parts of the State: "Jerusalem crickets," "shucks," "by jing," "by cracky," "dinged if I don't," "jeeminy-crimminy-whiz," "gosh danged," "gosh a'mighty," "I swan," "gee whiz," "gee whilliken," (formed on Jerusalem), "by gravy," "by grab," "dad zooks," "dad burn," "by gum," "great scott," "all-fired," "I'll be dogon'd," or "daggon'd" (Barrie uses a similar form, "dagont" in "Sentimental Tommy"), "for the land's sakes," "my goodness," "oh, my," "the dickens," "laws-a-mercy," "plague take it," "oh, foot," "oh, sugar." Many of these phrases, apparently inoffensive, in reality mean much more than may appear at first glance. Possibly the woman who said that the three authors she was accustomed to remember when she got her finger against the stove were, "Dickens, Howitt, Burns" was not aware that "dickens" means little devil (it is a contraction of the old diminutive devilkins). Change the r in darn to m and you have the original of this word. "Dinged if I don't" means "damned if I don't," while "gosh danged," "gosh a'mighty," etc., are stronger still. And so it goes.

A few words concerning writers of Indiana dialect will perhaps not be out of place here. Of all these the two greatest are, of course, Edward Eggleston and James Whitcomb Riley—Eggles-ton in prose and Riley in verse. Of the two, Eggleston is more distinctively Hoosier than Riley. As most persons are aware, the dialect in Riley's poems is "doctored" somewhat to meet the exigencies of meter and rhythm; he occasionally manufactures a phrase to slip off the tongue easily. Some harsh criticisms have been made of Riley on this score, but, we think, entirely without justification—certainly with none if there be such a

thing as poetic license, or if success justifies means.

Eggerton, to the other hand—despite some serious defects in his literary style—reproduces with remarkable fidelity the real Hoosier dialect of the southern part of the State. Of course, it may occasionally occur to some of his readers that the talk of such characters as Mrs. Means, or of the Rev. Mr. Bosaw, the hardshell Baptist, in “The Hoosier Schoolmaster,” is overdrawn, but any one that is acquainted with even the Mrs. Meanses and the Bosaws of to-day knows that in this respect he “underdraws” rather than overdraws. Eggerton does, however, overdraw some of his characters. In most cases he is moderately skilful in his use of the various methods by which a speaker may be made by the language he uses to betray his own character or to reveal that of another. Every one that has read “The Hoosier Schoolmaster” must have felt the effectiveness of the iteration and reiteration of “no lickin’, no larnin’, says I,” by Pete Jones, and of “we’re all selfish akordin’ to my tell” and “to be sure” by the basket maker, who “fit” the British at Lundy’s lane. But, on the other hand, some have felt that an excessive use of such methods has often resulted in a caricature rather than a character.

From the title one would naturally expect that the author of “The Gentleman From Indiana” was a writer of Hoosier dialect. As a matter of fact, Tarkington is not to be so classed. “The Gentleman From Indiana,” in the first place, is not a dialect story; and further, so far as the individuality of the dialect it does contain is concerned, the scene of the story might just as well have been laid in Illinois, or Ohio, or even Kansas. The book has numerous excellent qualities, but they are not such as come from a skilful use of dialect. Certainly if the author possesses a tithe of the knowledge of folk-speech possessed by Riley or Eggerton, he has not displayed it. To a genuine Hoosier, “The Gentleman From Indiana” is unreal. Such an one much prefers the author’s less labored and really delightful story, “Monsieur Beaucaire.”

Before closing, we quote the substance of some very pertinent remarks bearing on the subject of Hoosier dialect in literature, recently made to one of the writers by Dr. Weatherly, of the State University. “A few months ago,” said he, “I met a

typical Hoosier in New York city. He was perfectly natural, perfectly individual; but you will not find him in any of the books, for, the truth is, no one has yet succeeded in getting a real, live Hoosier into a book. Eggleston has given us his talk, and Riley has occasionally given us some delightful and promising mirror-like glimpses, but neither has quite succeeded. If we look long enough, we see that the man himself is not there. A certain indefinable something is wanting."

Doubtless many persons have had much the same feeling. Some moderately good Hoosier dialect stories there undoubtedly are, but the characters in them have too often been either caricatures or else mere automatons.

[Berry Sulgrove, speaking with authority on this subject (see *History of Indianapolis and Marion County*, p. 89), credits the young poet Riley (this was more than twenty years ago) with presenting the old patois "more fairly than any other delineator", but speaks of a distinguishing raciness and quaintness, with a tone and turn of humor similar to that of the Lowland Scotch dialect, that had measureably disappeared before Mr. Riley's day. Among other expressions he cites "stobbed" for stabbed, "daunsy" for stupid, and "hone," to long for, still retained in our slang. Another word once in vogue but now wholly forgotten, and not given by the above writers, was "gostrate." To gostrate, as nearly as we can learn, was to talk windily and superfluously, as, for example, a certain type of orator does. This style of talking not being yet obsolete, and no term in the received vocabulary quite fitting it, "gostrate" should have been preserved.

It should be noted that the so-called "Hoosier dialect," especially at the present day, is more or less in the imagination of writers who are seeking the picturesque. In a word, something more than 15,000 school teachers at work in 10,000 schools, and nearly a thousand local newspapers that reach almost every home, along with numerous other educational forces, such as institutes, societies and many kinds of meetings, have very decidedly modified speech as well as general intelligence. Furthermore, what passes as Hoosier speech is not only the rural language elsewhere, but it by no means has the distinctiveness and fixity of the Yankee or Southern speech. For example, a Yankee, particularly of the rural type, may be known anywhere and always, by his cyow or hyouse for cow or house; the Southerner by his antipathy to the letter r, but the Hoosier can not be identified by any such peculiarity—*Ed.*]